Grief Is a Spiritual Practice
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Loss can change the trajectory of a life. It shifts our days and interrupts our nights. It breaks open our hearts and forces us to reckon with the big questions of life: Where is God? Who am I now? How do I pray?

Over time, grief actually becomes a spiritual practice.

At Unity, we hear from people whose grief is fresh as well as those who miss loved ones from years ago. We hear anguish and gratitude, darkness and light from those in the valley of the shadow of death.

We offer this booklet as spiritual support for those who are grieving and those who love them. Our writers have explored the many aspects of grief as they lost parents, spouses, and children—sometimes suddenly, or after a long illness, or even by suicide.

Beautiful poems here express the depths of grief, and classic messages from *Daily Word* have comforted the grieving for nearly a century.

Grief takes as long as it takes, and there is no right or wrong way to express it. Nor does it really end; instead we gradually take new shape around it.

We hope this booklet not only comforts you but illuminates your journey of grief, so you can see clearly that you are not alone.

Your Friends at Unity
At 15 years old, while most of my high school friends were concerned with finding a date for the sophomore dance, I had been living through my father’s three-year illness. I thought he would get well the way anyone else does after being sick. I didn’t know that having cancer meant he wouldn’t recover.

We never talked about it. I now know my parents were trying to protect my little brother and me from the pain of that discussion, but the lack of knowledge left me totally unprepared for Dad’s death.

One morning during my father’s illness, I promised to relieve my mother at the hospital after she stayed overnight with him. I couldn’t wake up that morning. It was as if I were drugged with sleep, drowning in quicksand.

When I finally was ready to leave the house, my mother arrived at home and said, “It’s okay. You don’t have to go to the hospital. Dad died this morning.”

I wish it had been different. I didn’t know he was dying. I deeply regretted not being prepared for this moment, not being able to ask questions or understand his dying process. I felt like an outsider unable to come to resolution alongside the rest of the family. I was angry that I had been kept in the dark, but I wasn’t emotionally prepared even to admit that anger to myself.

Although I didn’t know it then, dying is a natural part of life. However, no one wanted to talk to me about it.

Maybe It Was All Perfect

I blamed myself. If only I had gotten to the hospital earlier, I would have been there for him. My heart broke because I wasn’t able to say goodbye. I felt my father had been stolen from me. My guilt for not being with him was tremendous. It took a long time to identify, sort out those feelings, and come to resolution.

Regrets and guilt are burdens that keep us from living fully in the present. Our thoughts are filled with “shoulda,” “woulda,” “coulda.” If only I’d insisted that he see a doctor sooner. If only I
had said those things I wanted to say. If only I had gotten to his side while he could speak to me.

The list of regrets can go on and on, but the feelings underneath include powerlessness, sorrow, and even anger. It can be difficult to accept the reality of what is. We may blame ourselves when there is no one else to blame. Our regrets and guilt may be our attempt to hold on or control something we have no control over.

Part of the grieving process may be wishing that our loved one hadn't died, that they hadn't endured any suffering, and that we didn't now have to experience the pain of losing them. We might wish everything were different.

What if we could allow a new spaciousness of knowing there is a divine purpose to whatever happens? There might have been lessons, unanticipated gifts, expansions of the heart, and even healings that would never have occurred if life hadn't unfolded just as it did.

How to Avoid Regrets

There's an old saying that graveyards are littered with guilt and regrets. Yet it is possible to have no regrets when death comes. Sometimes we lose a loved one suddenly, and sometimes we have the mixed blessing of time during a longer dying process. If we want to remain regret-free, it is up to us to stay in the present with our relationships.

This takes a commitment to keep current with what we need to say, to clean up our messes, and to make amends quickly. When a loved one is ill, you can tie up all the loose ends as long as your disclosure doesn't bring unnecessary pain to a dying person.

One of the most fulfilling things we can do with a loved one who is seriously ill is to ask questions that give witness to their life, to their successes, and to some of their challenges. It can be a blessing for them to know that someone has heard and knows who they have been and that in some way their story will live on.

Have those talks with your loved ones and begin them early and often. Clear up misconceptions, heal whatever needs to be healed, forgive, release, and complete unfinished business together. Tell the person you love them, if that is your truth.

Leave nothing undone. Act as if this is the last day. Be in the present because the present is the only time we have. Love is the only thing that is important. Create times of sharing and unconditional love. Listen without judgment or criticism.

Just sit and listen. Let the ears of your heart lead you in everything you do with and for your loved one. Losing them will still hurt, but your time together at the end may be something you treasure forever.

Rev. Patricia Gulino Lansky is a Unity minister in Charlottesville, Virginia, and author of the book, Accepting Death, Embracing Life: How Death Teaches Us to Live. Read more at embracingyourlife.net.
When I see pictures on social media that poke fun at us human beings, I generally save them to my phone. It’s a spiritual practice for me, especially on days when grief is very alive. It’s a way to smile during moments when all I really want to do is hold the loved one I’ve lost when I am feeling so alone.

One of my favorite graphics reads: “If I manage to survive the rest of the week, I would like my straitjacket in hot pink and my helmet to sparkle.”

Navigating the landscape of grief often requires moments of silliness and levity, especially when death has come after a very long illness. I lost my beloved of 15 years, Frank, to AIDS.

He lived with the illness for 22 years, and my 15 years with him sometimes felt like a slow march to death. Other days, gratefulness was the menu of the day. It changed the way I lived then and even now.

You learn to make plans and then get comfortable with last-minute changes. You learn to laugh whenever you can and not to leave anything unsaid. You learn to do the things you’ve always wanted to do, and you learn to cancel those “bucket list” ideas. You allow exhaustion to wash over you as you reach your threshold, and then begin again the very next day, finding rejuvenation in unexpected places. You learn to “pack lightly” because you have no way of knowing where life, or death, may take you that day.
I refer to all of this as my spiritual practice of living life unrehearsed, which results in “being tenderized.” I’ve learned that being tenderized is where the juiciness of life is, and it was how I lived with my beloved through illness and death.

Those 15 years brought the yo-yo unpredictability of the illness; an emotional and psychological roller coaster too complex to describe; many illnesses and symptoms of “unknown origins”; and the ever-present shame, stigma, and misunderstanding our culture holds around HIV/AIDS and projects onto anyone near it.

It was 15 years of the reality that suffering and pain are always around me and emerging from within me, breaking my heart open.

Breaking open can happen in ways that are tender or it can shatter me into thousands of shards. If I had lived our life dodging the pain, then my heart would have become dry and brittle and easily broken into pieces. Instead I had to choose to face the harsh realities of our life, including the immense likelihood of his leaving me at any moment from a horrible, painful, frightening illness.

Tenderness is alive as a result of allowing moments in life that are hard, unpredictable, and scary to be placed on my heart. Being tenderized was allowing the joys and the sufferings of our lives to touch me, to stretch me, to soften me.

Having a life that was unexpectedly rearranged and choosing to be tenderized gave me greater capacity to hold suffering, which then stretched me even further into living our life together in new ways. Like plants, we created tendrils. Those buds represent new life, climbing and reaching to other plants for support and love, which is what life is about.

In his book Letters From a Modern Mystic, Frank Laubach says, “Somebody was telling me this week that nobody can make a violin speak the last depths of human longing until that soul has been made tender by some great anguish. I do not say it is the only way to the heart of God, but I must witness that it has opened an inner shrine for me which I have never entered before.”

Living life unrehearsed is to step into the unknown and face myself, as well as others, with deep and abiding tenderness. I must allow everything to come into my heart with no anesthesia—the end of a friendship, the laughter of a stranger, the sound of rain, a child’s failure at a task, the smell of freshly baked bread, or the death of my beloved—because tenderness is what the world is yearning for and depending on from each of us.

Rev. Kelly Isola is a Unity minister and chair of the Greater Kansas City Interfaith Council. Read more at kellyisola.com.